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Capturing Scandal: Picturing the Sultan's Harem in Turn-of-the-Century Morocco

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In 1905, a series of European illustrated newspapers reported on the activities of the ruler of one of the last independent nations in Africa, Sultan Abd al-Aziz of Morocco. These journals, including *L'illustration*, the *Illustrated London News*, *Sketch: A Journal of Art and Actuality*, as well as stories reproduced a few years later in *Harper's Weekly* in the United States, foretold the decline of the Sultan's relationship with his subjects and his gradual loss of political control to external forces. Rather than describe his failure to collect taxes, tensions with local leaders, or the encroachment of European authority, the stories focused on the activity that seemingly encapsulated the fall of the regime: the Sultan's photographic practice. Articles such as "In spite of the Prophet: A Moslem Ruler as a photographer," and "Photographs: How the Emperor of Morocco defies the Prophet"¹ highlight the dichotomy between the Sultan's activities and his religion. Even more shocking than these headlines, however, were the accompanying photographs of the "amusements" in the Sultan's court and the photographs taken by Abd al-Aziz himself. These photographs circulated images of that which had been impossible for Moroccans or Europeans to see in person: the Sultan's harem.

While the accompanying stories list the number of gadgets and activities that allegedly "distracted" the Sultan from effectively running the country, the Harem photographs caused the greatest stir. Rather than acting as mere illustration or accompaniment to the articles, these images *were* the news and deserve to be examined as such. These photographs came to define the Sultan's relationship to Europeans, his view of Islam and Euro-Moroccan relations. Furthermore, they shaped the tumultuous relationship between Abd al-Aziz and Moroccans, and established the perception of the Sultan's photography as a revolutionary practice that symbolized a complete break with his beliefs and his country. Abd al-Aziz's appropriation of the camera and his staging of harem photographs could be viewed as a challenge to the predominately European representations of the Maghreb circulating in the early twentieth century, or as a counterpoint to the European perceptions of Arabs as backwards and devoid of modern expertise. The circulation of these images in a European context, however, controlled their distribution, manipulated their interpretation, and sensationalized both their form and their content.

The path from the Sultan photographing his harem to their publication in European journals remains unclear. While the Sultan enjoyed photography and employed European photography instructors with ties to illustrated news journals, he did not appear to have been an active agent in the articles that accompanied the photographs. The author of the *l'Illustration* article in which the photographs first appeared is anonymous and does not relate any first-hand encounters with the Sultan, and the *London Illustrated News* and *Sketch: A Journal of Art and Actuality* both reproduce the images from *l'Illustration*. As sultan, Abd al-Aziz did attempt to reconcile certain elements of European and Moroccan technologies and cultures, by dictating European dress and determining what could be photographed outside the palace walls in the early years of his reign, but the articles in European illustrated journals frame his activities as a complete rejection of Moroccan faith and traditions. Given the emphasis in the articles on the un-Islamic nature of the Sultan's photography, and the attacks on the Sultan's character and ability to govern, it is doubtful that Abd al-Aziz would have knowingly participated in an activity that would further injure his already damaged reputation. Even if Abd al-Aziz had contributed these images, his motives for doing so were lost in the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of the Sultan in the press. By controlling the distribution of these photographs, the European illustrated press determined their meaning and crafted a narrative of Abd al-Aziz's disregard for his traditions and his subjects. In doing so, they delegitimized Abd al-Aziz's reign and questioned his ability to faithfully rule his nation, in order to justify the need for European intervention.

While the Sultan's harem photography circulated freely in Europe and the United States, most Moroccans never saw these images. This uneven distribution of visual cultural materials shaped and reflected the uneven power relations between European imperial nations and Moroccans.² Moroccans adopted the printing press later than much of the Muslim world because Moroccans believed that "the acceptance of printing . . . signified the modification and sometimes the abandonment of traditional Islamic principles," which were more strictly enforced in Morocco than elsewhere in the Muslim world.³ Pre-Protectorate Morocco had limited newspaper circulation, which predominately targeted the foreign population, and a Moroccan illustrated press did not exist until after the establishment of the protectorate in 1912. While the European press emphasized the uproar in Morocco resulting from the publication of the harem photographs, the unequal access to these images, and the question of the Sultan's participation in their publication, demonstrates the ways by which Europeans created and manipulated news through photographs.

Abd al-Aziz took control of the Moroccan sultanate upon the death of his father, Hassan I, in 1894. Until 1900, the young Sultan relied upon the regent Ba Ahmad to fulfill the majority of his duties as sultan and to quell the rebellions that questioned his legitimacy. Upon Ba Ahmad's death, Abd al-Aziz was faced with the difficulties of governing against a series of internal and external challenges marked by increasing pressure from the religious *ulama* as well as from encroaching European powers. Faced with a growing European presence in Moroccan political and economic interests, Abd al-Aziz embraced certain European technologies, such as the camera, and incorporated them into his activities as sultan. Critics in Morocco and abroad lambasted Abd al-Aziz's interest in European technologies and used this to demonstrate that he was an unfit ruler.

European journals alluded to the Sultan's religious affront to Islam through both the public display of the forbidden site of the harem as well as the Sultan's participation in the act of image making, which is restricted in Islam. The inclusion of these restrictions in an article on the Sultan's photographic activities highlights the extent to which Abd al-Aziz's photography—through the act, the subject matter, and its subsequent publication—effectively distanced him from his subjects. It was precisely this distance as

epitomized by these news photographs, the journals later implied, which would lead to his dethronement in 1908.

The oppositions to figurative imagery in Islam are nebulous, as aniconism is not specifically addressed in the Qur'an, and the sayings and actions attributed to Muhammad compiled in the hadith that oppose figurative representation have been interpreted in different manners throughout Islamic history. Limitations upon image making were codified only in the late Umayyad or early 'Abbāsīd eras, and both Salafist and Orientalist interpretations of sacred texts in the modern era reinforced these restrictions.⁴ Beginning in the early nineteenth century, Moroccan sultans showed growing support for Salafist interpretations of Islam, which rejected foreign influence in any aspect of Muslim society, religion, and culture. The camera represented these very forces that Salafism attempted to eliminate in a region that had some of the strictest restrictions against figurative representation in the Islamic world. In Europe, Orientalist study of Islamic sacred texts reinforced the notion of hostility to figurative representation, and European presses drew from these Orientalist and Salafist studies to denounce the Sultan's activities.⁵

Abd al-Aziz turned away from such restrictions upon his first exposure to photography in 1901, after which he decided to hire a photography instructor and summoned both the Lumière cinematographer Gabriel Veyre and an English photographer, John Henry Avery, to Marrakesh. While Avery only stayed in the Sultan's court through 1901, Veyre remained in his employ for several years, and also worked as a correspondent for *l'Illustration*. Abd al-Aziz's interest in photography and alleged religious transgressions quickly gained attention at home. Al-Kattani, an influential member of the *ulama*, blamed European technology for the downfall of Abd al-Aziz and Morocco: "How could they not defeat us when we have forsaken the practices of our Prophet and filled our time with their practices, their goods, their trinkets, and their novelties?"⁶

Abd al-Aziz's decision to take photographs of his household, and British and French newspapers' desire to publish these images, adds a new layer to the European obsession with the harem and demonstrates the Sultan's attempts to navigate the path between Moroccan isolation and colonization by European powers. By photographing the women in his household participating in non-traditional activities, Abd al-Aziz challenged both the European trope of the harem and the Moroccan tradition of isolation of the Sultan's household, and created a new vision of the harem, one in which women actively participated in the introduction of European technology in Morocco.

The Sultan regularly incorporated members of his harem into his activities, teaching them to take photographs and ride bicycles, and taking them for drives in his automobiles. Gabriel Veyre also staged cinematography screenings for the harem, with a curtain divider separating him from the women. In addition to cinematography shows and photography lessons, Abd al-Aziz often used these women as his models. According to Veyre, the Sultan enjoyed taking portraits of women in his harem (Figs. 2.16a and 2.16b):

When he had mastered the camera, his greatest joy was to photograph his favorite wives in countless copies. He had them dress themselves in their most beautiful attire, embroidered, multicolored; he took charge of their jewels, pearls and herons, and thus adorned, he posed them in front of backdrops scattered with flowering patterns, close to tables draped with carpets.⁷

Abd al-Aziz's participation in their publication beyond his role as photographer is unclear. The photographs can be seen, but his voice, as well as those of the women captured within the images, is unheard. As opposed to other harem photographs that circulated in Europe in this era, which had been



Figure 2.16a Matrons from Abd al-Aziz's Harem, *L'illustration*, 23 September 1905.

designed as strictly European fantasies of the harem, Abd al-Aziz's photographs shattered the European myth of an exotic, sexualized harem by showing women in the harem in the course of their daily lives.

While the Sultan's unpublished harem photographs cannot be found, the surviving images in journals allow for a unique vision of the women living in Abd al-Aziz's harem. Whereas other prominent Middle Eastern leaders who photographed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seem to have "self-orientalized," or internalized and re-presented European notions of the Orient in their images, Abd

al-Aziz instead presented viewers with his own vision of the harem, one devoid of the exoticism that marked harem photography in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁸ In one undated photograph, probably from 1901 or early 1902 and reproduced in *L'illustration* in September 1905, two young women, the *matrones* of the harem, sit staring at the camera (Fig. 2.16a).

The women, slaves responsible for managing the women of the harem, are dressed in long, covering material that spills from their bodies to cover the floor in front of them.⁹ Both women are posed, looking straight at the camera with their hands on their knees. A telegraph, which Veyre most likely installed for the Sultan when he installed similar devices throughout the palace, is visible in the background. This telegraph, and the electric sign marking the year underneath, denotes a deviation between this image and Orientalist images that circulated in Europe in the nineteenth century. Whereas Orientalist images highlight the “traditional” nature of Middle East and North African societies, and erase any trace of modernization in an attempt to present these societies as timeless, Abd al-Aziz's photographs instead show the methods by which his household embraced both the modern and the traditional. The accompanying text, however, does not comment upon this representation of the women, but focuses solely upon the scandal of seeing the interior of the harem.

In lieu of the naked, lounging odalisques found in European photography, other photographs by the Sultan published in *L'illustration*, the *Illustrated London News* and *Sketch: A Journal of Art and Actuality* in 1905, present the harem fully clothed in the palace's *Cour des Amusements* (Fig. 2.16b).

These images of the women, on bicycles and gazing at pictures, dressed in their normal daily wear and paying little attention to the man behind the camera, offer a non-sexualized, non-Orientalized account of the Harem. Such images are not intended for ethnographic purposes, nor to support European theories of Muslim women, but are rather designed as a type of family portrait or a documentation of his court. Abd al-Aziz attempted to use the camera to transform the dominant perceptions of the Orient and its inhabitants.

In 1905, these images were first published in the mass-produced popular French weekly *L'illustration*. The article described the Sultan as photographer and incorporated images from a film he had taken of his wives riding bicycles in the courtyard. *L'illustration* remarked upon the photographic act as at least as significant as their content. For *L'illustration*, the fact that he took these images indicates his break with the Moroccan tradition of restricting European access to Moroccan interiors as well as the limitations on figurative imagery in Islam. The article does not address Abd al-Aziz's incorporation of the harem into his activities, nor the departure from previous forms of harem imagery. The *Illustrated London News* also reproduced the photographs a week later, providing credit to *L'illustration* for the images, alongside captions reproaching the Sultan for “defying” the Prophet by taking up photography: “In spite of the Prophet: A Moslem ruler as a photographer”; “Photographs: How the Emperor of Morocco defies the Prophet.”¹⁰ A few days later, John Avery published an article in the *Sketch* on their controversial status and reproduced the images from the *Illustrated London News*. While these photographs in many ways counter the existing stereotypes and predominant representations of the harem, the accompanying stories do not speak to this opposition, focusing instead on the act of photographing itself. The photographs mark a striking departure from Orientalist photographs through their incorporation of signifiers of modernity—the bicycle, a telegraph—but the language of the accompanying articles expunges any meaning of the photograph that strays from scandal. By focusing on the images as a marker of the Sultan's transgression, the periodicals reinforced the transformation of these images from “mere” photographs into news.

The genre of the photographs published by European journals reinforced their status as “news.” Gabriel Veyre emphasized in his autobiography and letters that he took images for the Sultan enacting

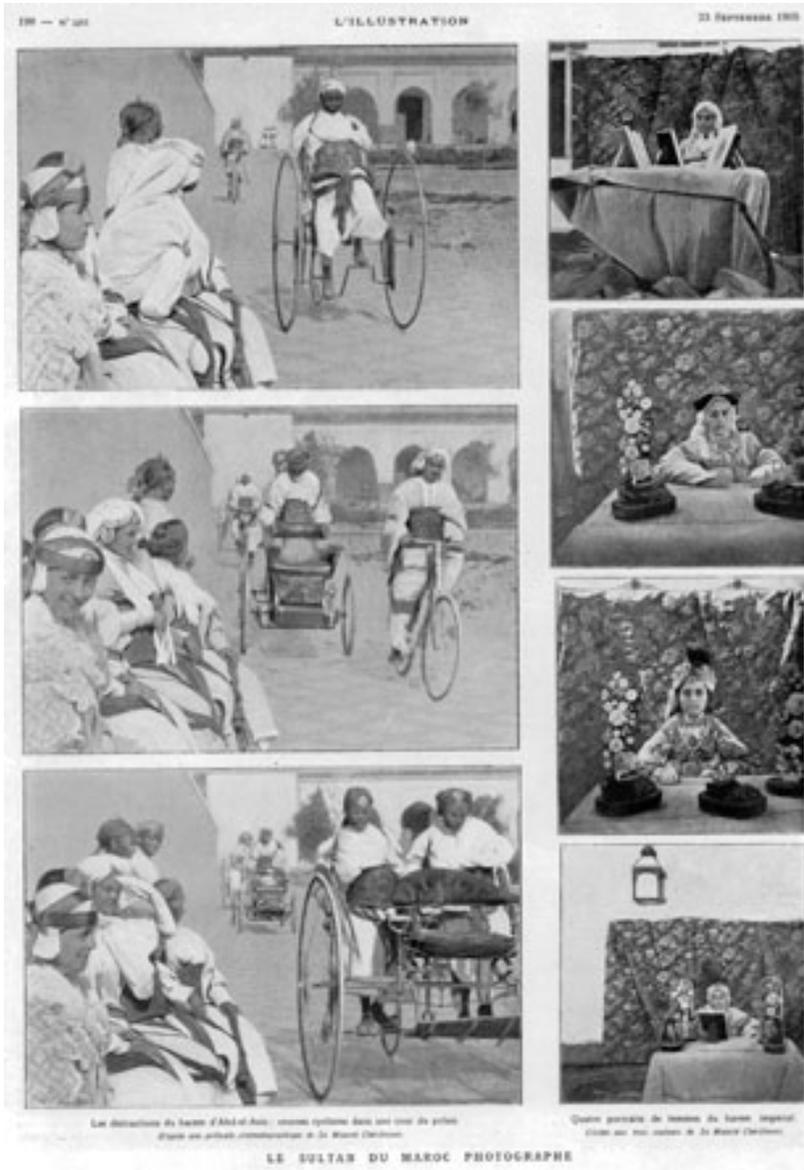


Figure 2.16b Abd al-Aziz's Harem and Amusements, *L'illustration*, 23 September 1905.

his religious and political duties as head of state, as well as the Sultan's accomplishments as a photographer, however, the only images the illustrated press focused on were those of the harem. *L'illustration*, the *Illustrated London News*, and *Sketch: A Journal of Art and Actuality* framed the Sultan's modernity as cause for scandal, and fixed the meanings of these photographs as such. While the staging

of the images counters many European stereotypes, and in a non-European setting could have been used to contest the Sultan and his harem, the appropriation of the Sultan's photographs in the context of European authority instead served to justify European intervention in the region. Transforming these images from the Sultan's personal and documentary photographs into press images reinforced European stereotypes about Morocco and reasserted European power. Observers drew a direct correlation between the Moroccan Revolution that dethroned Abd al-Aziz and his interest in European technologies. However responsible for his downfall the photographs were, becoming an unwitting "photojournalist" for the European press did not help Abd al-Aziz maintain the support of his subjects or independence from European colonial powers.

Notes

- 1 The *Illustrated London News*, 30 September 1905: 466–7.
- 2 Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
- 3 Fawzi Abdulrazak, "The Kingdom of the Book: The History of Printing as an Agency of Change in Morocco between 1865 and 1912" (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1990): x.
- 4 On image-making and Islam, see Oleg Grabar, *Early Islamic Art, 650–1100: Constructing the Study of Islamic Art, Volume I* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate/Variorum, 2005), Sylvia Naef *Y a-t-il une "Question de l'Image" en Islam?* (Paris: Téraèdre, 2004), Priscilla P. Soucek and Silvia Naef, "Taswir" *Encyclopaedia of Islam Online*. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/taswir-COM_1195. Retrieved 20 July 2009, Stephen Vernoit, "The Visual Arts in Nineteenth-Century Muslim Thought," in Doris Behrens-Abouseif and Stephen Vernoit, eds, *Islamic Art in the Nineteenth Century: Tradition, Innovation, and Eclecticism* (Boston: Brill, 2006).
- 5 Naef, *Y a-t-il une "Question de l'Image" en Islam?* (Paris: Téraèdre, 2004): 10.
- 6 Muhammad al-Baqir al-Kattani, *al-Shaykh Muhammad al-Kattani al-shahid* (Rabat: Maktabat al-Talib): 37. Cited in Henry Munson, *Religion and Power in Morocco* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993): 63.
- 7 Cited in Philippe Jacquier Farid Abdelouahab and Marion Pranal, *Le Maroc de Gabriel Veyre 1901–1936* (Paris: Kubik editions, 2005): 20.
- 8 This term is borrowed from Ali Behdad, "The Power-ful Art of Qajar Photography: Orientalism and (Self)-Orientalizing in Nineteenth-century Iran," *Iranian Studies* 34 (2001): 141–51. Behdad analyzes the way in which Nasir al-Din Shah's private photographs of his wife "depicts himself and his wives in the same stereotypical way as European artists represented Middle Eastern women and the oriental despot. While women are portrayed as objects of male voyeuristic pleasure and symbols of exotic sexuality, the Shah is represented as a solemn figure of cruelty and despotic power." Behdad: 148.
- 9 See Mohammed Ennaji, *Serving the Master: Slavery and Society in Nineteenth-Century Morocco* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999) for a full discussion of slavery within the harem and the Makhzen.
- 10 The *Illustrated London News*, 30 September 1905: 466–7.